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THE USE OF THE VISION IN RELIGIOUS TEACHING.

THE prophets in many cases were themselves taught through the vision, or ecstasy. The most significant, perhaps, of the prophetic messages were received by this method.

THE VISION The greatest of the prophets, as well as men who could hardly be said to have been touched by the prophetic inspiration, were taught in this way. The method is described in the case of Balaam, the son of Beor, who says :

Balaam, the son of Beor, saith,
And the man whose eye was closed saith :
He saith, which heareth the words of God
And knoweth the knowledge of the Most High,
Which seeth the vision of the Almighty,
Falling down, and having his eyes opened. (Numb. 24 : 15.)

We are told that Saul, meeting a band of the prophets coming down the hill from the high place, with psaltery and timbrel, pipe and harp, received the spirit of Jehovah and began to prophesy ; and when, later in life, he is seeking David to slay him, the spirit of God comes upon him, and he is stripped of his clothes and prophesies before Samuel, falling down naked all that day and all that night.¹ It was Elisha² who, by the use of a minstrel, wrought himself into the ecstatic state, that is, the state in which "the hand of the Lord" came upon him.

The Scripture records do not speak of the trance or vision in the case of Samuel, Nathan, Gad, David, Joel, Hosea, Micah, Nahum, Zephaniah, or Habakkuk. Amos, the herdsman, who is not a prophet by profession or by training, receives much of his information in the vision. Isaiah is led to take up the prophetic calling by a vision, which is, perhaps, more familiar than any other in Scripture. Jeremiah is forced into the prophetic work by a

*SOME FACTS
CONCERNING
VISIONS*

¹ 1 Sam. 10 : 5.

² 2 Kings 3 : 15.

series of visions, in the first of which a hand touches his lips and makes him eloquent; the second is that of an almond tree; the third, that of a boiling pot. There was something in Jeremiah which made men say of him that he was as one who is mad and maketh himself a prophet. Ezekiel outdoes all his predecessors, both in the number and in the character of his visions. He first receives his call in a vision in which he sits motionless for seven days, in a stupor of astonishment; God's hand falls upon him; he is lifted up and carried by the spirit from the river of Chebar to Jehovah's house in Jerusalem. The trance would almost seem to have been Ezekiel's normal state. After the captivity comes Zechariah, with his many visions: the horses and their riders, the four horns, the man and the measuring line, Joshua before the angel, the golden candlestick, the flying roll, the women in the ephah, and the four chariots. In Daniel, likewise, there appear visions; for, although the vision of the four beasts may better be regarded as a dream, the ram with the two horns, the he-goat, with the interpreter, Gabriel, in the eighth chapter, were seen in a trance; for we are told that he fell upon the ground in a sleep, and afterward fainted and was sick for many days.

Reference has been made above to the physical state of the person receiving the vision. It was the state of trance, or ecstasy, and was essentially the same abnormal condition of mind and body which is seen in the trance of the dervish, or the trance into which the southern negro falls when under religious excitement. It was in this same physical condition that the oracular utterances of the Greeks and Romans were given. The body loses its self-control; an unnatural sleep is produced, sometimes by external means, such as music or dancing; at other times by the violent action of the emotions. For this reason it is not always easy to distinguish in Scripture the vision from the dream. This state was and is not essentially different from the hypnotic state. The trance is generally self-induced; but, we are informed, hypnotism also may be self-induced. The condition is, at all

*THE PHYSICAL
AND PSYCHO-
LOGICAL STATE*

events, a partially conscious one. As in hypnosis, the most marked feature is "the dominance of some one idea and the exclusion of practically everything else." A person in a trance may remember his waking experiences, and when awake may remember his experience while in the trance; but ordinarily the hypnosis in a trance is so deep that he remembers only vaguely. Such shadowy memories as are recalled seem to belong to another person. This other person, who then has taken possession of him, is a "demon," a "spirit," a "god." It is not difficult to understand how persons in this mental condition may prepare wonderful utterances of a poetic character, when we remember that in ordinary dreams men have solved difficult problems. Coleridge's composition of *Kubla Khan* while in a trance produced by opium is a further illustration of the psychological possibility. In the trance, therefore, the mental faculties may be extremely active, although certain of the senses are closed to impressions. Perhaps right here is the important point: the mental faculties are all the more active, because certain of the senses are closed to impression. Now, as God made use of the dream, so he made use of this other strange and mysterious mental state into which, through all ages, men of certain temperament and under certain circumstances are constantly falling.

A study of the history of visions in Scripture discloses the following points:

*GENERAL
OBSERVATIONS
ON VISIONS* 1. Visions, like dreams, are given to men who were utterly ignorant of God, men in whose hearts there was no true conception of God, or of truth with which higher truth might be related.

2. Visions, like dreams, seem to have been employed in the earliest periods of Israelitish history, when even the servants of God knew little about him, that is, before there had arisen the more intimate knowledge of his character and his works which time revealed.

3. During the periods when the greatest prophets live and when prophecy is at its height, the vision is used only in the case of one prophet, Amos, who expressly declares that he had

not received the prophetic training, and another, Isaiah, who, at the time, was young and inexperienced, and by this means was brought into touch with the majesty of Jehovah.

4. As prophecy begins to wane, the vision comes into more general use, and Jeremiah, perhaps on account of his nervous temperament, frequently falls into the ecstasy, while Ezekiel and Daniel, with the post-exilic Zechariah, present this phase in its most developed form.

The question we may ask ourselves is: Of what practical value in teaching is the vision today? How may we employ the vision? or, is this a method of teaching which belongs utterly to the past? We are ready to agree that the case is not altogether a clear one, and yet it would seem that there must be something of real value in a method of which so much was made in both the Old and New Testaments. And, besides, there must be something of real importance in a method which has been employed among many nations and in many religions. The only alternatives are that the method was an illegitimate one, or that the constitution of man's physical and mental nature has changed. To neither of these propositions can we possibly give our assent. The use of the vision has, at all events, suggestions for our time.

*SOME PRACTICAL
SUGGESTIONS*

Advantage is to be taken, in teaching religious truth, of the physical and mental condition of the pupil. There are times when, for various reasons, the pupil will be much more susceptible to religious influence than at other times. We may be more specific:

*SPECIAL PERIODS
OF VISION*

1. There is for every boy and girl a period of life, the period of adolescence, during which the possibilities of religious influence are distinctly greater and more definite than during any other period of life. In this youthful period response may be gained to efforts and influences to which both body and mind would be utterly indifferent either before or after it.

2. A suitable environment not infrequently produces an effect, especially upon a sensitive soul, not unlike that of the

vision or trance. This may be a scene of nature, or perhaps a visit to a great cathedral, or still again the reading of a masterpiece of literature. In any case, the soul is lifted up and separated in a measure from all that ordinarily surrounds it. It is in this mood that one may sometimes best receive and appropriate the great thoughts of God.

3. It is possible for any and every individual to withdraw himself from the world, in fact or in thought, for a period sufficiently long to enable him to bring himself into closer touch with God and with divine thought. It is such separation, such elevation, that often makes it possible for a deep and lasting impression to be produced. This, in other words, is meditation; or, in still other words, the closet, in which the soul brings itself into close touch and communion with its God.

There is, moreover, still another principle involved in the vision, of which actual application may be made in our times. The very word "vision" expresses it; for a vision involves

THE VISUAL METHOD a picture which is presented to the mental eye, and is thus seen even as it can be seen with the natural eye. The visual method of instruction, upon which emphasis is rightly being placed, is one of the most important principles connected with the vision. The man in ecstasy sees; and the sight is so vivid, the impression so distinct, that his whole being is overpowered by it. It is this living vision of sacred truth which men need today, and which the teacher must give if he would teach. In order that religious truth may find lodgment in the mind of man, distracted as most minds are distracted in these times, it must be accompanied by a method which will command attention. There may be some of us who will fear a method which might prove sensational, but this, as a matter of fact, is the very thing desired. It requires the blow of the sledge-hammer to produce any kind of sensation in the minds of some men, so deadened are they to the message of true light. The sensation must come, however, not as the result of a blow, but by the penetration of a light which will give a strong and overpowering vision of the truth.

There is still another application of the vision method. This, however, is only a different presentation of the thought already suggested. The vision was effective both for the *SELF-SURRENDER IN LEARNING* reception and the proclamation of truth, because it represented a distinct concentration of mind and effort. The mind was withdrawn from everything that would distract it. The whole effort of God was employed in the presentation of the thought in vision. There is a great lesson for us here, if we would but heed it. In order to be learners, we must, for the time being, detach ourselves from everything that would distract us. We must surrender ourselves absolutely to the influence of the spirit that is teaching us. Without such definite separation from all that would hinder us and scatter our attention, we may hope for nothing. To be taught by a teacher, we must give ourselves up wholly to the influence of that teacher. The more complete the surrender, the more direct will be his influence. We might well hesitate to render this full submission to a human teacher; but in our work with God, in our effort to obtain knowledge of him from himself, there is no occasion for hesitation. It is only such unreserved submission to the divine will that can bring us the vision of divine truth.

Is it possible for men to have visions of God today, such as those granted in past times? The answer must be emphatically in the affirmative. It may not be necessary for us, *VISIONS TODAY* now that we have seen God himself as revealed in his Son, to go into a trance. We are not to suppose that the prophets who made use of the trance or ecstasy saw God more clearly than those prophets to whose enlightened souls he revealed himself without such physical medium; but in their cases, as in our own, there existed, in a natural way, the same conditions which the trance was intended to produce artificially. The man who lives in closest touch with God is, one might say, in a continuous trance; not, however, in an unnatural state, but in a natural state, in which God is seen clearly and distinctly, a vision which makes the life of him who thus lives separated, as it were, only by a step from heaven.